UNDERSTANDING SWAHILI CULTURES: SOME CRITICAL REMARKS.


I The researcher at the Swahili coast

East Africa and in particular the coastal region has been attractive for many researchers from the colonial period to the present times. Foreign researchers mostly from Europe and America have come to the Swahili coast with much curiosity on a wide range of subjects. Beginning in the 19th century when Africa was regarded by Europeans as "the dark continent" inquisitive geographers, prospective traders, colonial administrators and Christian missionaries came to satisfy their curiosity. On top of their duties, they also embarked on research on various disciplines, in particular geography, linguistics, anthropology, and history. Their findings were then compiled in the form of books and theses which today form the basis of our reference.

Apparently, the compilation of early Swahili coastal historical and anthropological works by European scholars was based on the word of mouth and vague written materials. With the arrival of archaeologists in the 1930s, it was at least possible to establish new anthropological theories on the Swahili people and their civilization. By excavating the remains of once flourishing Swahili states, mysteries surrounding the founding dates and the histories of the buried and ruined towns scattered all along the East African coast were uncovered. Unfortunately, at this crucial period, the local people ignored and possibly were unaware of the importance of portraying what they themselves see as the correct history of their own culture until recently, when it was too late. Many present-day African scholars argue that much of the history which is known and taught in schools is a product of colonial historians who seem to have doctored some events to their own interest. On the other hand, the Muslims argue that since the writers were totally Christian biased, they made the history to show Christianity as the saviour of Africans while Islam is the cause of the local people's suffering. In total, all parties agree on one point: there is a need to revise all history written by mzungu—foreigners to match with Africanism.

A second wave of organised and well-sponsored researchers arrived after the East African countries attained independence from British possession, encouraged by the unfinished work of the pioneers. The majority of these researchers would be sponsored by foreign universities to study a topic in preparation for a thesis which then will be handed over for a degree award and later may be published. In certain instances, foreign experts working in the coastal area of East Africa may also embark on research for their own curiosity and then publish their manuscripts. Despite the abundance of available written material on various Swahili-related subjects, scholars feel that more information is still to be unearthed subsequently, and documented
Among all these foreign researchers notably known in the past and of recent years it were the historians and social anthropologists who wrote very controversial literature that raised anger among the local people. Researchers who gather their information have considerable individual freedom in giving their opinions or conclusions. Although their research will be guided by written materials, informers and other ways to authenticate their work, eventually their views and conclusions towards the subject they study is foremost important. Usually, it is this part of ‘the researcher’s opinion and conclusion’ where the problems or achievements of a research work mainly arise. This problem may appear more complicated when it enters into the study of Swahili people and their cultures.

I personally believe that it is essential for a foreign scholar of culture, language, religion or history, who sets out on a study pertaining to the Swahili people, to first and foremost acquire a deep understanding of Islam, and to have a thorough knowledge of Swahili and Arabic. It is well known that Swahilism is forged largely by Islam although Africanism plays a big role. Many works raised arguments and controversies on topics where discussions on Islam and culture are inevitable. Since both Islam and culture are intertwined in Swahili practices, most non-Swahili researchers appear to be confused on what is ‘Islam’ and what is ‘culture’. Because of this problem writers often criticize Islam where culture should have been the target and vice versa. In the end, anger arises from the local people against the study. A good example of this problem can be found in an historical study *Muslim women in Mombasa 1890-1975*, by Margaret Ann Strobel (New Haven 1979). This work gives an account of life and gender experiences of Swahili women in Mombasa from 1890 to 1975. I believe Strobel would have given a soberer and better understanding of the gender issues discussed in her book if she had comprehended what Islam has in store for women. In many parts of her book she has portrayed Islam to be the stumble block for the development of women where culture should have been.

Knowledge of Islam and Arabism by the researcher could be of immense help for a more thorough study of Swahili culture. However, sometimes the researcher may be overtaken by his own beliefs and biases in his analysis. For instance, if an Iranian Muslim was supposed to do research on ‘Muslim women in Lamu’ there is a high possibility that the study will be weighed and concluded by the person in terms of Shiite Islam without adequately taking into account that the local people are Sunni of the Shafi sect. A good example is the study *The Sacred Meadows* by Abdulhamid El-Zein (New York 1974), in which he analyzes the social structure, role and influence of the *masharifu* from the Riyadha mosque in Lamu town. The forward commentator credits the author with the following words:

Zein’s study is certainly one of the very best, and it is perhaps worth noting he came to it with a well educated Egyptian Muslim command of the Arabic Language and of Islamic literature. This background was very useful to, since Lamu, like other communities of the East African Coast, has been in interaction with Muslims of the Middle east and the Indian Ocean throughout its History. But Zein did not make the easy assumption that his Arabic-Islam background and his earlier field study in Nubia automatically gave him a quick and easy understanding of Islam in Lamu.’ (p xvi)

I don’t want to fail to acknowledge the success of the study, but unfortunately this book has raised a lot of anger from the Lamuans because of the wrong and controversial picture which it
has painted of the people of Lamu on their religious beliefs and culture. The majority of the Lamuans have judged the contents of this book as blasphemous. Of course, some people - I being among them - share a different opinion on *The Sacred Meadows*. I regard the general contents, especially those of culture, as portraying the Lamuans almost as they really are. However, I criticize the author in his analysis where he fails to separate the two major intertwining subjects: religious rituals and cultural rituals. The result is a distorted picture of the existence of the "special Lamu Islam." His deeper knowledge of Islam and Arabian language as an advantage was of no use because of his bias in his study. El-Zein took his Islamic Sunni of Hanbali sub-sect background combined with his Modern Islam as a thermometer to gauge Lamu Islam of Shafi sub-sect.

In addition, the writer also failed to acknowledge the confidence which the informers had had in him by adding his own interpolating opinions where he judged that the informants gave disjointed information. In the end, the informants became the victims of the sins committed by the author. Generally, this is an attitude of many researchers when they finish absorbing all needed information from the informants, they ignore the confidence given to them. Eventually, if another researcher shall appear for the same information he is denied.

While making a study at the Swahili coast the atmosphere is seductive because of the friendly attitude by the local people. Every one could be convinced to be an informant provided the 'informed' acknowledges in some form his or her appreciation, however, of late the local people have changed their attitude towards foreign researchers insofar they don't easily part with information as a result of some irritating and uncomfortable literatures.

My point which I would like to make here is that, foreign information gatherers - especially research students - should not see that a controversial and interpolating study is a quick and easy way with which he or she could earn a good recognition. What I believe is more important is that the information gathered in a study should be digested by uninformed and inquisitive readers including the 'victims of a study'.

In conclusion, if a considerable number of research works (some published) by foreigners about the Swahili and in particular about Lamu has raised a lot of noise, why then the noise is not heard to those concerned? First, the literature that is published or remained in a form of a thesis mostly addresses specialists (although also available to the normal reader). In addition, the majority of these publications and theses can rarely be seen in an place like Lamu or even Mombasa, hence the reaction from the local people is automatically blocked. Secondly, the majority of the local people have no idea how to react to such publications. Probably it would be the best way to deal with this problem if our own university scholars who promptly receive such publications could encourage our own local research students to readdress those topics which the local people see handled inappropriately by foreigners. Unfortunately this is not the case since most of our higher learning institutions are heavily underfinanced, hence such repeated research projects will not be prioritised.
II Veils and Videos

Many books have appeared about Lamu as a result of research conducted mostly by foreign students and scholars on different disciplines. Among these publications and theses the ones most disputed by the Lamuan people are those on social anthropology. At first it was *Sacred Meadows* (El-Zein 1974) which analyzed the religious and cultural symbolism in the complex Lamu society that raised a lot of anger among the Lamu people. In this book two fundamental issues were profoundly discussed: culture and religion. When this book was released I was 7 years old but according to the information which I received from my elder brother, there was a lot of discussion of the book in the mosques and appeals went as far as the higher offices of the Government to stop its circulation. In spite of the difference of subjects *Veils and Videos* shares a problem with *The Sacred Meadows*. The book has already become the talk of the town, despite its unavailability to the majority of the people. I am afraid it will not be long that protests will be loudly heard from the daily newspapers and to the government.

*Veils and Videos* discusses three major issues: culture, religion and feminism. In my introduction I explained how the interrelationship between culture and Islam is one of the main sources of confusion when researching a Swahili-related subject. By including issues on gender and modernity Fuglesang’s research has added problems to the understanding of Lamuan society. This is because the three aspects contradict each other in respect to Swahili and Lamu context. Islamic practices are often not in harmony with Swahili (African) culture and worse so with liberal or modern feminism. I am talking about the feminism made up of *fikra za kizungu* - western ideology. If the three issues are collectively discussed, confusions are likely to occur and hence to infer anger from the local people. Fuglesang herself was aware of the sensitivity of these issues:

> Because of the sensitivity and controversial nature of issues of gender and intimate relations, as well as the ambivalent experience and feelings about researchers in the Lamu community, all informants will remain anonymous. (p. 31)

In social anthropology writers are expected to exhaustively tackle or analyze every factor that positively or negatively affects the development of a community. Culture, religion, economy, gender, politics etc. should be transparently analyzed. For many African communities including the Lamuans, uncovering the secrets of traditional rituals by an outsider, mentioning names, and exposing private lives is unacceptable and considered a taboo. Whereas in western societies everything should be seen transparently.

Many Lamuans are indifferent to *Veils and Video*. At the same time there are a few readers who would like to comment and criticize the book without condemning it wholly. In my opinion the study on Lamu women’s daily life, gender, culture and social stratification is well researched and portrayed, although fellow Lamuans may judge the whole book as rubbish. However, certain parts in this book which touch gender, cultural transition and Islam, cannot go unchallenged. In my critique of *Veils and Videos* I would not like to dwell on general gender-related problems which now take central stage on international platforms. My concern will be whatever is misreported by Minou Fuglesang in her book.
The Media

After finishing the last page of *Veils and Videos* you will not fail to get the impression that modernism is penetrating Lamu society at an unstoppable rate with media and movies playing a leading role. Moreover, the book portrays young women of Lamu becoming rebels towards their culture and religion because of media influence. To say the least, Lamuans are known to be very conservative, even if change will benefit their lives directly. For example, recently the government wanted to ease problems of commuting from Lamu to Mokowe (where Lamu airport is situated) by introducing a ferry which could be used free of charge, replacing services by private boats who charged high fees and operated without schedules. Before the idea could be realized the Lamuans protested without giving strong reasons and wanted the private boats to remain. Fuglesang's assumption that a tremendous cultural change has taken place as a result of the introduction of mass media is over-enthusiastic and exaggerated, or at least needs further proof.

Today the 'female eye' has been liberated to some extent in Lamu. It has become a 'seeing eye' open to the world as women appropriate the gaze of the public for their own pleasure (p. 2).

Many are exposed to ideologies of modernization through the images created by the mass media, i.e., newspapers, radio, and videos, which are flooding into Lamu Town. Popular culture, particularly music and film from India, presents yet other images of 'development' and 'modernity' (p. 52f).

Lamuans and in particular educated young women do not like to read newspapers, neither listen to the radio. Daily newspaper readers are mostly people from upcountry working in Lamu Government offices who subscribe 70% of the two major dailies coming to Lamu. Inspite the abundance of tape recorders and radios in many houses of Lamu, the young women prefer to listen to taarab songs from Bhalo, Maulidi and to a small extent Indian music. Western music may be played but not often.

Indian movies watched on videos or in theatres have played a minimal role in social change since they were introduced in Lamu in the 1940s to warrant any credits. Possibly, the influence may be on intimate relationships which is also not much visible. I believe if western movies would be watched four days a week - the same as Indian movies - then the influence of western life style would be inevitable. Indian movies can not be considered a possible factor of influence on cultural change attributing to its plots and scenes a duplication of what is happening in Lamu society. Even with the introduction of powerful dish receivers which give access to television channels of Europe and the Middle East, Lamuans prefer to switch their television to Middle Eastern channels which give them an opportunity to see programmes which fit into their society.

The changes in life style among young women of Lamu are very much influenced by a preference of the Middle East. The agents of the influence mainly are the Lamuans who work in the Middle East, sometimes taking with them their wives. These workers have a lot of influence once they return to Lamu. They arrive with new trends and ideas which mostly young women and men will be eager to adopt. For Lamuans and generally all Swahili everything which comes from the Middle East - whether good or bad - is treated as healthy for the culture.
although sometimes some of these trends contradict Islamic teachings. Besides the Middle East, Mombasa as the second largest town after Nairobi and the biggest in the coastal region has been a major agent in remoulding the culture of Lamu. Since Mombasa is a cosmopolitan town which attracts job seekers, many Lamuans have emigrated to this town. In the process they adapt urban ways of life which in the long run are forced on Lamu society. Secular education has also played a certain role in the dynamic social changes of modern Lamu. Educated youth will always like to accentuate the existing gap between those who attended school and those who have not. This often is demonstrated by imitating western fashion styles and mixing Swahili with English. Such types of practices are mostly prevalent with young men and rarely with young women.

**Gender and Veils**

Gender equality is a difficult subject not only to the people of Lamu who have mixed cultures of Islamic and African origin, but even to the rest of the world. With the world becoming a global village, gender equality issues are taking central stage. The recent Population meeting in Cairo and the ongoing Fourth World Women Conference in Beijing are part of activities which focus on future deliberations of women issues. These gatherings tend to be good opportunities for feminists of different principally western ideologies agitating for gender equality in all fields dominated by men. Often such international women forums will adopt resolutions which will be favoured by European and American feminist movements at the expense of third world women who have different approaches to their problems:

But the leading question remains: Did women have to go to Beijing to be able to demand their rights? That they had the opportunity to share their experiences is not the justification for the mileage. Because at the end of the day women will have to fight within the boundaries to get what they deserve. For after all their problems make sense in their cultural contexts of their individual countries and communities. This means that real change must take at home (Editorial, *East Africa Standard*, 4th September, 1995).

Although gender equality is a final goal which all women around the globe would like to realize, however many of the women aspire to solve their problems in their own style bearing in mind their faith, ethnic affiliation and where they belong.

It is very difficult for women from the third world societies to adopt in practice ideologies put forward by leading western feminists who could either argue their theories as liberal, marxist, radical or psychoanalytic. These theories of which some date back to the 18th century were all created as a result of western experience with a materialistic background. In reading literature by western feminists I tend to think: How can one convince a Lamu woman that there is no biological difference between a man and woman, a common assumption among radical feminists. Women in Lamu believe that men and women are different in nature and needs, hence equal but different.

Fuglesang's criticism of Lamu society as suppressing the self-realization of young Lamu women tallies with the same thought of western feminists. They accept that a modern and free woman should act like a man and forget about her biological difference. Such materialistically guided theories will not be practicable in an Islam oriented society like Lamu. In that case it is not surprising for Fuglesang to scoff Islam as an active factor in Swahili community in
suppressing women's rights. In her book she had the following comments to say concerning the veils which is far from being the case.

However, she [Nuru] admitted that some aspects of Sharia law, such as those relating to inheritance, testimony, and divorce by repudiation, were discriminatory and should perhaps be revised (p. 92).

Nuru, an informant, who is here appearing by a fictitious name is known in Lamu and so she was confronted by curious and angry Lamuans, mostly women, regarding to this statement. She was eager to say that "I did not say this statement, it was the author's view who wanted me to accept the presence of gender discrimination in the Quran." From the foregoing statement it is very clear that the author had a silent motive to introduce controversial statements in the name of informants in her research. If Muslim women in Lamu are heard to raise discontent on gender issues, then it is probably on cultural norms which truly suppress them and hinder them in their possibilities with respect to development. The Prophet Mohammed has put emphasis on education for both men and women. One of his hadith (sayings) he states:

"Seeking education is a must for Muslim men and women."

Apart from this saying there are many more verses in the Quran and hadith which give a woman many rights which I believe contemporary Muslim men may find very difficult to implement. It is unfortunate that most researchers will be only pointing to the veil as an indicator for Muslim women's backwardness and segregation. As Fuglesea claims:

Yet the young women complain about the often strict surveillance imposed upon them, and many are ambivalent towards the reinforcement of segregation and veiling norms promoted by reformists (p. 198).

The buibui (veil) worn by Muslim women has always been seen in the Western world as suppressive without listening to Islamic rational arguments on the positive aspects of the veil. The veil does not stop a Muslim woman from thinking or acquiring what she feels is good for her. Muslim women in Iran are taking part in all nation building activities at the same time wearing a veil. In Lamu and many coastal towns of East Africa where Swahili Muslim faithful form the majority, women are respected if seen wearing a veil. I believe this is what women need. Because of this even some non-Muslim women who reside or work in Swahili dominated towns have seen advantages in wearing the veil in order to be accorded with respect in public places. With the introduction of abaya and koti veils which come in different colours, designs and materials it has become a booming fashion in Mombasa, Malindi and to a certain extent Lamu. It is now increasingly difficult to distinguish Muslims and non-Muslim women or a Swahili and a non-Swahili women on the veil attire.

Moreover, Fuglesea in her argument against the veil did fail to disclose a single case where a Lamu woman had been physically punished for not wearing the veil. All her evidence about the rejection of the veil by the young women of Lamu is justified by a single incident of a curious girl who removed her veil in the presence of women. In this incident Fuglesea did not mention whether men were present to witness the whole exercise, but I don't presume so. If men were there then the incident could have been described as rebellious towards the veil. A fact which I like to point out clearly is that in every society there must be a few liberal minded
people who would like to perform their things in their own style, to which that young Lamuan is no exception. But such people should not be mistaken as representing the general opinion. And so, it was not appropriate at all for Fuglesang to generalize single incidents happening in women circles and portray them as a common practice. Her disapproval of the buibui is clearly demonstrated by her unrealistic description of the veil as *very uncomfortable and unbearable* hot garment which usually needs both hands to handle (p 286, fn 1) One will wonder whether Fuglesang tried to veil herself when she was conducting the research to arrive on these remarks. I asked Muzna Bahsan, a dress maker and kofia design instructress at the Swahili Cultural Centre about her feelings towards this description of the veil, and she told me that she had worn the veil for almost 25 years and had not experienced any of the problems mentioned by the author Maryam Omar, a third year student at Khartoum university studying the Sharia. She said that "the writer's comments were in a bad taste which were meant to offend the Swahili women".

The main purpose of *Veils and Videos* is to provoke the young women of Lamu to denounce their cultural practices and religion to agree with materialistic feminist ideologies of the west. Reading between the lines, Fuglesang has clearly demonstrated a partisan analysis of female youth culture in Lamu by acting as a judge who is in favour of a western mode of life. The facts of her research have been very much diluted by assumptions and exaggerations motivated by her biased feminist views. Probably a European or American reader will find the personalized events fascinating while the local people will describe the whole book as boring or purposeless. Due to the rejection of the literature by the local people it is unfortunate that the study will only be received by western readers which I presume was not the purpose.

In the process of writing this critique I have interviewed a number of Lamu women who happened to read or heard about the *Veils and Videos*. Almost all of them showed their displeasure with the contents of the book. Worst of all, most of the informants have been identified, although she has mentioned them by fictitious names. Fuglesang has described their occupation, status, ethnic affiliation and gender which made it easy to identify the informants in a small town like Lamu, hence nullifying their anonymity. The informants are now having a difficult time with Lamu society for helping the author compiling material that lead to that unwarranted literature. With Lamu being transformed into a ‘resort’ for foreign researchers, more uncomfortable literature is bound to appear. But as Lamuans are now becoming more aware of effects of such literature, researchers should prepare for more difficulties in or out of the field. After all, most Lamuans openly complain that these literatures *hazina faida* - have not benefited them in any way except humiliating them.

The process of globalization in which the media play a major role should not be forced onto fragile societies like that of Lamu where the results can only be cultural confusion instead of so-called modernity. While Lamuans may support gender equality, they will refuse to accept the materialistic equality dictated by the first world through communication technology. Fuglesang's *Veils and Videos* which demonstrates her over-enthusiastic attitude towards cultural transition might be found to probably present a true picture of female youth culture and gender equality in Lamu fifty years from now.

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